

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
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Savile, "The Test of Time"

*What does it mean to say of something, in particular a work of art, that it "passes the test of time"?

--Mere survival is neither sufficient nor necessary for passing the test of time, at least when it comes to artworks. Against sufficiency, Savile offers the case of the red granite crocodiles. Against necessity, Savile claims that testimony and copies (e.g., of Leonardo's *Leda and the Swan*) can insure that a work passes the test of time even when it no longer exists.

--We desire "effective survival" in artworks, and this is a necessary condition for passing the test of time (according to Savile). This is defined as "persistence of the work in our attention." (254) This attention must be of an *aesthetic* nature, as opposed to holding in virtue of the artist's identity, the economic value of the work, or any other extraneous reason.

--Further, this survival must hold under the correct *interpretation*:
"To the extent that we want survival *reliably* to underwrite evaluation we have to insist that the survival that counts must be under an interpretation that is appropriate to the work." (255)
(Savile then considers, as we did when discussing Intentionalism, whether legitimate interpretations can vary over time.)

--Also, this aesthetic attention must be given to the work for its own sake, rather than to compare/contrast it with another work that we are more interested in. (256)

--Naturally, the longer the work receives such attention, the more confident we can be that it has passed the test. Also, it is better if the artists and critics, in particular, are the ones giving such attention.

--So, here's the official formulation:
"A well-chosen autographic or allographic work of art securely survives the test of time if over a sufficiently long period it survives in our attention under an appropriate interpretation in a sufficiently embedded way." (257)

*Conclusions

--Here are some inferences we are entitled to draw once we know that a work has passed the test of time:

1. It is a work of high quality.
2. Passing the test of time vindicates the earlier *grounds* for praising the work.
3. Conversely, passing the test of time can disprove earlier grounds for criticizing the work.

--Here are some inferences we are entitled to draw once we know that a work has failed the test of time:

1. The work has failed in some way (beyond simply not surviving the test of time??).
2. This failure confirms earlier criticisms.
3. This failure disconfirms earlier praises.

--Unsurprisingly, Savile concludes that works that pass the test of time should be judged better than those that do not pass the test. Other things being equal, if we know that a work has not passed the test of time, then we need not concern ourselves with it.

*Savile returns to the point that a work can pass the test of time even if it no longer survives. He gives special attention to cases in which the work has been radically restored, so that little, if any, of the original remains. These substitutes can work as intermediaries, but two questions arise. First, what is required for us to be attending to the original (even if it no longer exists)? Second, what kinds of intermediaries (copies, restorations, etc.) are appropriate for this task?

--Savile's first attempt at answering these questions:

"One such narrowing of scope will be provided by insisting that there be sufficient [and non-accidental] structural affinity between master and mediating object." (260)

"We have a fairly clear suggestion as to what kind of objects will do as intermediaries, and have allowed ourselves to say that it is by attending to them that we may count ourselves as attending to the original." (260)

--Savile's second attempt at answered these questions is given in 5 parts, on p. 261. This is the answer he prefers.